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TERRORISM

A terrorist plot unearthed

The interrogation of a Lashkar-e-Taiba activist, trained in United States-sponsored camps from the Cold War era, points to a plot to bomb U.S. consulates in Chennai and Calcutta.

PRAVEEN SWAMI

in New Delhi

TWO decades after the United States began its war in Afghanistan, the chickens are coming home to roost. On January 7, acting on the basis of an intelligence tip-off, the Delhi Police arrested a Bangladesh national, Syed Abu Nasir, a top Lashkar-e-Taiba activist alleged to have been supervising an operation to bomb the U.S. Consulates in Chennai and Calcutta. Information on Nasir's arrest was at first treated with disdain by the U.S. Government, which believed that it was part of an Indian smear campaign against Pakistan. But subsequent investigation has led to disturbing evidence that Nasir's tale is true - and that the U.S. has no one to blame but itself for the war that Pakistan-based Islamic groups are now waging against it.

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) psychologist Frederick Gonnell was the first U.S. official to interrogate Nasir. Gonnell arrived in New Delhi in early January with an array of lie-detection equipment. Such equipment works on what might be described as the Pinocchio Principle - the assumption that the act of speaking a falsehood is reflected in measurable physical reactions. India possesses lie-detection equipment, but its use here has been minimal since few police officials believe that the method has any investigative value. In the U.S., by contrast, both official investigative agencies and major corporations place considerable value in such polygraph tests.

Gonnell carried out three separate sets of tests on Nasir, two in New Delhi and one in Chennai. Just what he asked the Lashkar-e-Taiba operative is not known. Officials who saw the equipment, however, told *Frontline* that it measured not only pulse rates and other traditional indicators, but also eyebrow movements and even small changes in facial expressions. At each session Gonnell used a detailed questionnaire, in which queries about Nasir's mission were interspersed with a set of control questions.

The U.S. was initially dismissive about the Indian claims, letting it be known that it believed that the bombing plot was a fabrication. A January 20 report in *The Washington Post* quoted U.S. State Department officials as saying that Nasir had walked into the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi in December 1998 offering information on threats to the security of the U.S. Nasir's information, they

said, was simply not credible. The officials also told *The Washington Post* that Nasir had been picked up by the Delhi Police shortly after his visit to the Embassy, implying that the Lashkar-e-Taiba recruit had been held in illegal custody until his arrest was announced on January 7.

BUT what Gonnell found shook the U.S. intelligence apparatus. The psychologist's three rounds of tests led him to conclude that Nasir had indeed told the truth about his role in a plot to blow up the Consulates in Chennai and Calcutta. By the third week of January, a special counter-terrorist team of the U.S. was in New Delhi to interrogate Nasir. Kevin Huska, Karl Wighalm and Frederick Wong identified themselves to Indian officials as FBI officers. A fourth U.S. official, Mark Rossini, offered no information on his post, which led Indian officials to believe that he was a Central Intelligence Agency(CIA) operative. This group of four was conducted to interrogations by Embassy security staffer Albert Djong.

The disdain U.S. officials had shown for Nasir's story in December now dissolved into alarm. For one, Nasir had information that no casual observer would possess. He knew that only one vehicle other than those of the Consulate had regular access to the Consulate in Chennai. This was a Bank of America car that came to pick up cash collected from visa applicants in the course of the day. Nasir also spoke about a service lane that divided the Consulate offices in Calcutta from a residential area, where a security oversight meant that vehicles could be parked unchecked. A medium-sized explosive device planted in the lane, he pointed out, would wipe out buildings in a 100-metre radius.

S. THANTHONI

The U.S. Consulate in Chennai, the Anna Flyover overlooking it.

Even more disturbing was the fact that Nasir's account of the plot bore alarming similarities to those that led to the explosions at the U.S. Embassies in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi last year. Nasir's cell had made videotapes of the physical environment of the two Consulates, and of the patterns of activity around them. It is unclear why these details of his story were overlooked when he visited the U.S. Embassy in December. Nasir claimed before Indian intelligence officials that his decision to offer information on the plot was driven by a growing Bangladeshi nationalist resentment against Pakistan. This sudden ideological *volte-face*, however, is more than a little implausible; some officials believe that he acted in anticipation of monetary gain.



Nasir's story is embarrassing to the U.S. security establishment. A literature graduate from Chittagong University, Nasir first made contact with the Islamic Right when he began working for the International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO) in 1991. The Saudi Arabia-based IIRO is engaged in charitable work in strife-torn areas such as Bosnia. It has also been closely associated with the billionaire terrorist Osama bin Laden. Transferred to the IIRO office in Bangkok and then to Lahore, Nasir made contact with the Lashkar-e-Taiba establishment, including its operations commander for terrorist activity in India Azam Cheema, field commander Abdul Karim 'Tunda', and supreme religious leader and head of its patron body, the Markaz Dawa wal'Irshad, Hafiz Mohammad Sayeed.

By 1994, Nasir was involved with the Lashkar-e-Taiba deeply enough to volunteer for an arms training course in Kunnad, Afghanistan. That camp and the Lashkar-e-Taiba's sprawling base camp on 80 hectares in Muridke near Lahore were both in essence U.S. creations. The Kunnad camp had been a forward base to train Afghan terrorist groups that are engaged in the U.S.' war against the socialist regime in Kabul. The Murdike complex was built with official patronage on land donated by former Pakistan President Zia-ul-Haq in 1987. The construction of the complex was one of the first major CIA-backed moves to create a base for operations against the Soviet Union-supported Gove-

ment in Afghanistan. If figures like bin Laden had no direct CIA links, the Lashkar-e-Taiba was from the outset clearly a U.S. enterprise.

Shortly after his training, Nasir was contacted for the first time by officials of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). One Brigadier Malik and one Colonel Farooq, he told his interrogators, had tasked him to cross the India-Bangladesh border and gather information on the establishments of the Indian Army's Eastern Command around Siliguri. The names of both Malik and Farooq have figured repeatedly in the course of the interrogation of terrorists who were active in Jammu and Kashmir; they have also referred to a group of officials in the ISI's 'Raja' and 'Chaudhury' units, which manage all India-related operations. Nasir set up home in Siliguri under the alias Robi Bose and began forwarding reports to a Dubai address. While he is not believed to have discovered anything particularly sensitive, Nasir proved his competence. He returned to Bangladesh in August 1998 in preparation for a new posting in Calcutta where he was instructed to monitor the Eastern Command headquarters at Fort William. Nasir travelled by road to Kathmandu and then to Lahore and Dhaka on a Bangladesh passport.

That last visit was to prove fateful. In the middle of September 1998, Nasir says, he was called to a meeting by Cheema. Sayeed was present there, along with the IIRO's Asia chairman, Sheikh Ahmad al-Ganidi. Cheema instructed Nasir to arrange safe passage across the Bangladesh border for six Lashkar-e-Taiba agents. These were Mustafa, Ibrahim al-Hazara, Ismail and Zainul Abedin from Egypt, a Sudanese national named Lui, and a Myanmarese national from the Arakan area, Hafiz Mohammad Saleh. Getting across the border proved easy. The group stayed for a month in Calcutta, and then proceeded to Chennai. Nasir then left for a brief trip to New Delhi, where he was arrested.

Nasir's story offers insights into the working of the Lashkar-e-Taiba. For one, if his account of the meeting in Dhaka is true, it is interesting that the organisation chose Bangladesh rather than Pakistan as the venue. Nor were any ISI officials present at the meeting; indeed, Cheema's instructions flew in the face of what Nasir had been told to do by his intelligence handlers. These facts suggest that the bombing plot was organised independently by the Lashkar-e-Taiba, perhaps without the institutional knowledge of the ISI. Clearly, despite its organic linkages with Pakistan's intelligence apparatus, the Lashkar-e-Taiba was now shaping its own agenda rather than being told what it could and could not do.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Syed Abu Nasir, who allegedly supervised an operation to bomb U.S. consulates in Chennai and Calcutta.

Little is known about what the six Lashkar agents who were given the task of carrying out the consulate bombings are now doing. Akhlaq Ahmad Khan, Ghulam Mohammad and Abdullah Sulfi, who organised the group's cross-border movement and stay in Calcutta, have, however, been arrested. Sulfi and Khan are known to have been previously involved in moving Jammu and Kashmir-based terrorists across border. For its part, the U.S. Government itself is maintaining a stoic silence.

A spokesperson of the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, Donna Reginsky, told *Frontline* that her Government "is in possession of information, which it is in the process of evaluating". Asked if the U.S. still believed Nasir's story was a fabrication, she offered no comment.

The reasons for the U.S. silence are not difficult to comprehend. Its most bitter enemies were not too long ago its best friends. The Markaz Dawa wal'Irshad leader Sayeed, who condemned the U.S.' bombing of Iraq in December, was responsible for sending hundreds of volunteers to fight the U.S.' war in Afghanistan. He received overt U.S. patronage, in that enterprise. The fundamentalism the

U.S. now condemns was politics that it encouraged enthusiastically through the 1980s, with senior U.S. politicians routinely describing the fascist clerics of Afghanistan as freedom fighters. To admit that the Lashkar-e-Taiba is now ready to join in a terrorist campaign against the U.S. would involve a painful engagement with the past.

"It's a bit like your own dog barking at you," says an Indian intelligence official wryly. "No one will believe that the dog has decided it doesn't like you anymore - until it actually bites."

Figures like the Markaz's Sayeed are the U.S.' own Bhindranwales. Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's recent declarations suggest that he is considerably more sensitive to the issues than the U.S. strategy establishment. Sharif has been attempting, albeit ineffectually, to rein in the religious Right's terrorist operations which have transcended any meaningful state control. The U.S., despite its polemic, remains more ambivalent. At least some persons incharge of policy continue to advocate a policy of rapprochement with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and, by extension, with chauvinist groups in Pakistan. They could discover that the U.S., as much as anyone in South Asia, will finally have to pay the price.

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